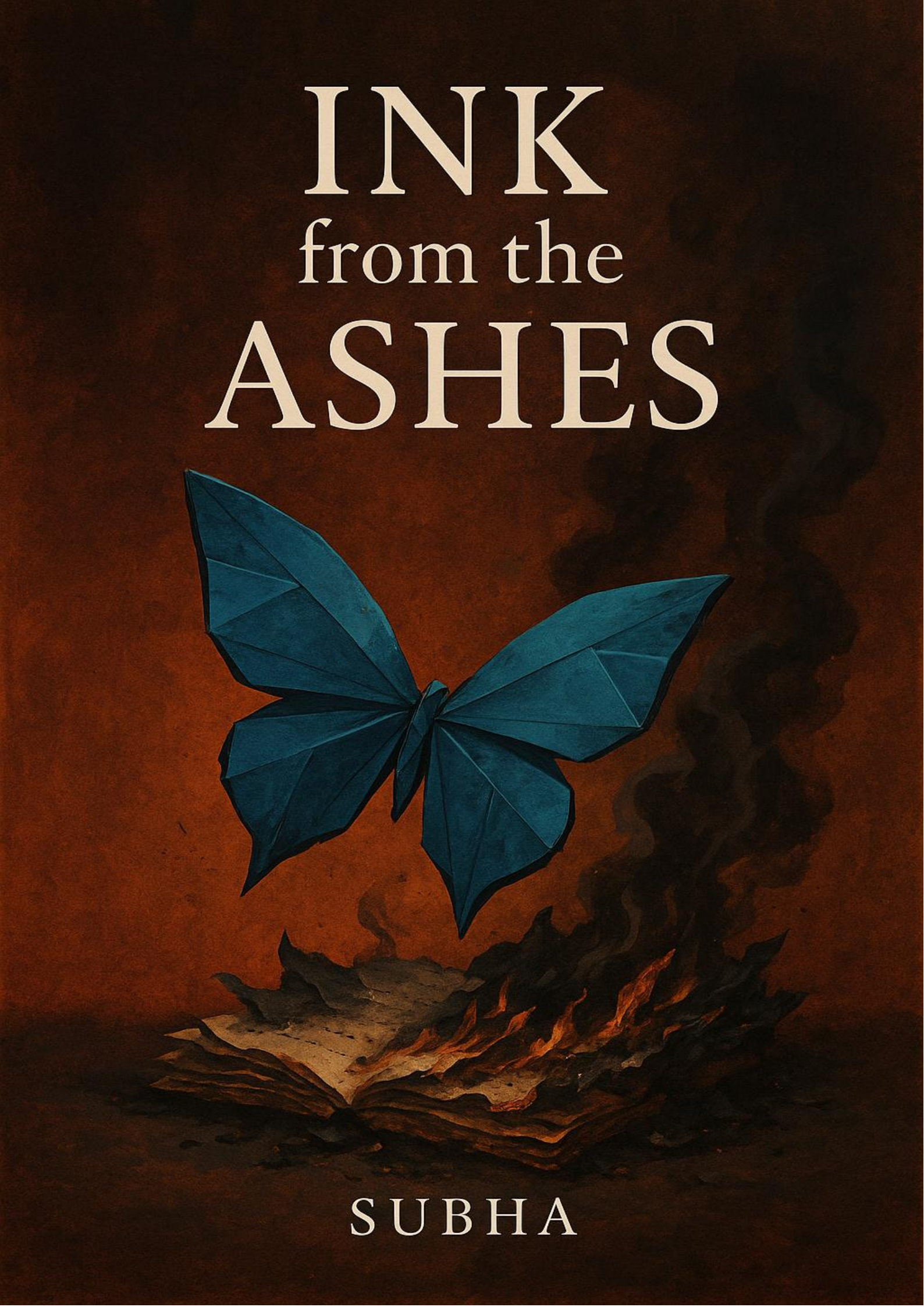
INK from the ASHES



SUBHA

INK FROM THE ASHES

AN JOURNEY FROM SILENCE TO STRENGTH

SUBHA

FINDING HOPE
BETWEEN
BURNT PAGES

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This is a work of nonfiction/memoir. Some names and details have been changed to respect privacy. The events and reflections are drawn from the author's memory and experience.

Cover Design & Formatting: Subha Ratikanta Sahoo
Editor

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Chapter 1: A Voice Too Small

Most people don't remember the exact moment they started disappearing.
Aanya did.

It was a Tuesday, hot and dusty like every other in her small hometown. The kind of town where time walked slower, where the loudest sounds were cycle bells and temple bells — and where dreams didn't fly, they waited for permission. She was twelve, sitting in the back of the classroom, her hand half-raised in a moment of bravery.

She had the right answer.
She was sure of it.
But the teacher never looked her way.

It wasn't on purpose. He simply didn't see her.
Like most people.

She lowered her hand. And that was it. The moment she started to fade.

Aanya learned early that people paid attention to loud voices, fast runners, and those who always knew the "right" thing to say. She was none of those. She loved words, but they got stuck in her throat. Her mind moved fast, but her mouth couldn't keep up. So she stopped trying.

She became the girl who always sat near the window.

Books were her only rebellion. While others raced through assignments to get the teacher's praise, Aanya wandered into

library shelves, losing hours between paper worlds. In books, no one interrupted her. No one laughed when she paused before speaking. In books, even broken people had whole stories.

One day, she found a battered notebook behind a cupboard, nearly thrown away with old exam sheets. She cleaned the dust from its cover and took it home. That night, she wrote a single sentence in it:

“I exist. Even if no one sees me.”

It felt strange. Powerful. Almost like casting a spell.

She didn’t stop after that. The notebook became her world. She didn’t write like a proper author — she didn’t know what that meant. But every page soaked in something she couldn’t say aloud: her fears, her small triumphs, the rage she didn’t know she carried. It didn’t rhyme. It didn’t follow rules. But it was *hers*.

Years passed. The world didn’t slow down.
But Aanya’s silence had evolved into something stronger: *observation*.

She noticed things others didn’t. The way someone’s foot tapped when they were nervous. The way a teacher smiled wider when someone got a question right — even if it wasn’t hard. She saw the tiny cracks in people’s masks. And she kept writing.

No one knew, of course. She never shared her notebook. Not even with her family. It was her secret rebellion, her invisible scream. She didn’t want to be *famous*. She just didn’t want to disappear completely.

But everything changed the day her notebook was accidentally left in the school library.

Chapter 2: The Notebook Left Behind

The bell had rung five minutes ago. Students swarmed out of the school like birds from an opened cage — shouting, laughing, slapping backs, comparing marks they claimed not to care about.

Aanya walked slower.

Her bag felt lighter than usual, and it wasn't until she reached the gate that she realized why.
The notebook.
She had left it in the library.

Her heart skipped. Not out of panic — at least not the kind others would understand. To anyone else, it was just a tattered notebook, dog-eared and unlabelled. But to her, it held pages of unspoken truths. Her handwriting, yes — but more than that, hers*elf*.

Every word she'd never said aloud. Every time she wanted to scream and couldn't. Every feeling she was told to ignore.

She turned around and sprinted.

The school library was quiet now. The librarian, a middle-aged man who looked allergic to enthusiasm, was locking the main cabinet. He glanced at Aanya with mild irritation.

“You need something?” he asked, jangling his keys.

“I… I left a notebook. Brown cover. It’s mine.”

He shrugged. “Check the reading tables.”

Aanya rushed past him, scanning every surface. For a second, the panic blinded her. What if someone had taken it? What if someone *read* it?

But then — she saw it.

There it was. Sitting on the edge of the third table. Closed, but not how she had left it.
Someone had touched it.

She picked it up, hugging it to her chest like a lost child. The librarian was already switching off lights.

“Found it?” he called out.

She nodded. “Yes… thank you.”

But inside, a different kind of storm was rising. Someone had seen a piece of her — and that was terrifying.

The next morning, a folded note sat inside her school locker.

“You wrote this?”

No name. No signature. Just those three words scribbled in pencil. Aanya stared at it as if it might catch fire in her hands.

Her first instinct was fear. The raw, pulsing kind. What if someone mocked her writing? What if it was a trap? What if they showed it to others?

But beneath that fear, another feeling flickered — *recognition*.

Someone had read her words… and not laughed.

At lunch, her classmate Aarav sat down next to her.

“You’re the one who writes in that brown notebook, right?” he asked casually, as if they spoke often. They didn’t.

Aanya froze. “Why?”

He pulled something from his bag — a loose page.

“I read this line: *‘I feel like a whisper in a world of megaphones.’* That’s yours, right?”

She stared at the paper. That sentence had poured out of her after a particularly bad day. She had never imagined anyone else would see it.

“I… yeah,” she admitted quietly.

Aarav smiled. Not mockingly. Not like the boys who made fun of quiet girls. This was different.

“It’s good,” he said. “You should share more.”

Then he stood up and walked away.

That night, Aanya stared at her notebook like it was a mirror.

She had always written for herself. To survive. To understand. To speak without being spoken over.
But now… someone had *heard her*.

And that changed everything

Chapter 3: The Unseen Stage

It started with a poem.
A small one. Just eight lines. She wrote it while waiting for a

power cut to end, the room lit only by the flicker of a half-dead candle. It wasn't planned, like most of her writing. It arrived the way pain often does — quietly, then all at once.

"I stitched my silence with shadows,
Sewn from rooms where no one knocks.
I planted roots in broken echoes,
Grew gardens behind locked clocks.
I learned to hum where voices cracked,
To float when words weighed down.
If living small means staying whole,
I'll wear my quiet like a crown."

She read it once. Then again. Something in it felt finished. Not perfect. Just *true*.

On impulse, she copied it onto a fresh page, tore it out, and — for reasons she still doesn't understand — dropped it into the school's annual magazine submission box.

She didn't tell anyone.

Weeks passed. Aanya forgot about it — or tried to. Exams rolled in, routines stiffened, and the familiar shell of invisibility wrapped around her again.

Until the day Ms. Sen stopped her in the corridor.

Ms. Sen was the English teacher — the only one who didn't reduce "writing" to marks and margins. She spoke with pauses and metaphors. She noticed quiet students, the way gardeners notice shy buds before they bloom.

"You wrote this, didn't you?" she asked, holding a printed sheet. Aanya recognized the poem.

Her heart stuttered. "Yes."

Ms. Sen smiled. “It’s stunning. We’re featuring it in the magazine. But I’d like something more.”

Aanya blinked. “More?”

“I’m organizing a reading circle next week. Only five students. I want you to read this aloud.”

Aanya’s throat closed. Public reading? Her voice? In front of people?

“I… I can’t,” she stammered.

“You *can*,” Ms. Sen said gently. “You just haven’t yet.”

The night before the reading, Aanya barely slept. She practiced in whispers. She practiced in her mind. She stood in front of the mirror, notebook in hand, voice trembling like candlelight in wind.

She imagined forgetting lines. Choking. Everyone laughing.

Then she imagined something else — a room where no one interrupted. Where silence didn’t mean weakness. Where her words landed in other people’s hearts the way books had once landed in hers.

That image — not confidence, not bravery — gave her just enough reason to show up.

The reading circle was held in the library. Just five students, like Ms. Sen said. No microphone. No stage. Just a circle of chairs and crossed legs.

When it was her turn, Aanya stood up slowly, like someone stepping onto thin ice. Her hands shook. Her voice cracked on the first word.

But she kept going.

By the fourth line, something shifted. The room didn't feel scary. It felt *still.* Eyes weren't on her — they were inside the poem.

When she finished, there was no applause. No dramatic gasp.

Just a silence.
And then: "That was beautiful," whispered one of the girls.
Another boy nodded silently.

That was all. And it was everything.

That day, Aanya didn't just read a poem. She reclaimed something.

Her voice wasn't too small.
It had just been waiting for the right moment to rise

Chapter 4: Matches in the Rain

It wasn't enough.

The library circle had gone well — better than she'd imagined. But Aanya couldn't forget how small the room had been. How safe. She'd spoken only because she knew it was temporary, private, contained.

But outside that circle, she was still invisible.
And worse — comfortable in it.

So that night, lying on her narrow bed with the ceiling fan groaning above, she did something reckless. Quietly reckless.

She created a blog.

The name came to her in a flash: **“Matches in the Rain.”**
Because that’s what her words felt like.
Small sparks in a world determined to drown them.

She didn’t use her real name. Just an alias — *Ash_04*. A soft, anonymous version of herself. One that could speak loudly without fear.

The first post was the poem she had read in the circle.

I stitched my silence with shadows…

She hit "Publish" before she could change her mind.

For days, nothing happened.

No likes. No comments. Not even a spam bot pretending to care.
She told no one. Not even Aarav, who had become a sort of friend by now — quiet, respectful, asking just enough and not too much.

She kept posting. Snippets, poems, messy thoughts, lines she scribbled in her notebook during chemistry lectures. Some were raw. Some were polished. None of them perfect.

Then one evening, it happened.

Comment #1:
“This feels like someone finally wrote my silence.” – @letterdust

Aanya stared at the screen. Read the line ten times. Her chest felt too small for her heartbeat.

Then came another.
And another.

A girl from Delhi messaged her privately. A boy from Kolkata shared one of her poems and wrote, *"Don't know who this Ash_04 is, but she gets it."*

Suddenly, her inbox was full of voices that sounded like her own. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just… honest.

She was anonymous.
And yet, she had never been more *seen*.

For weeks, she lived a double life.

At school, she was still the girl who kept her head down, who answered when asked, who blended into the crowd.

But at night, she became a quiet storm.
The girl who lit matches and let strangers warm their hands.

One afternoon, as she sat beneath the banyan tree behind the school building, Aarav joined her. He held out his phone, grinning.

"Didn't know you were famous," he said, flipping the screen toward her.

There it was. Her blog. Her latest poem. Dozens of shares.

Aanya blinked. "How did you…?"

He shrugged. "It felt like you. The writing. The voice. I guessed. You don't have to confirm."

She didn't.

But for the first time, she didn't deny it either.

That night, she posted something new. Not a poem. Just a note.

“To the ones who write from the edges,
who speak with trembling hands,
who fear being too much or not enough—
I see you.
And maybe that’s enough, for now.”

It was her most shared post yet.

Chapter 5: The Wrong Kind of Attention

The trouble started with a screenshot.

Aanya didn’t know who took it. She didn’t know who forwarded it to whom, or how far it travelled before landing in the staff WhatsApp group. But there it was—her poem, shared without credit, ripped from the quiet corners of her blog.

The title?
"Wear My Quiet Like a Crown."

Next to it: A line written by a sarcastic twelfth-grader.
“Who writes this cringe? Must be one of those emo juniors.”

The thread snowballed. Someone guessed it was Aarav. Someone else guessed it was one of the literature club girls. Then came a new message, typed quickly and casually by a history teacher:

“Let me know if this is one of our kids. We should guide them—too much darkness in this tone.”

The next day, Ms. Sen called Aanya in during lunch.

Not unkindly. Not angrily. But with a frown on her usually warm face.

“Do you know anything about a blog called *Matches in the Rain*?”

Aanya froze.

“I… why?”

Ms. Sen slid her phone across the table. “Some staff think it might be one of our students. The writing is beautiful. But… it’s raw. A few teachers are worried.”

Aanya stared at the screen. Her own words staring back at her, stripped of context. Detached from the safety of her pen name.

“I think it’s honest,” Ms. Sen said. “But you should know — if this is yours — anonymity can’t protect you forever.”

Aanya didn’t respond. Not a word.

Ms. Sen studied her. Then softened. “You don’t have to tell me anything. Just… be careful. The world isn’t always kind to people who bleed in public.”

By the time Aanya reached home, her chest felt like a locked drawer rattling from the inside.
She opened her laptop.

Notifications: dozens.
Comments: some kind, some confused, one saying, *“Your poems are being passed around our college WhatsApp group.”*

She scrolled until she hit the one that stopped her cold.

“Hey Ash_04, just found out your stuff’s being mocked by a bunch of people. Don’t stop posting. Please.”

Her fingers hovered over the *Delete Blog* button.

She could vanish. Start again. Pretend it never existed.

But another tab was still open — a message she hadn't answered yet.

"Hi. I've been reading your blog for two months. I don't know your name, but your words stopped me from doing something I can't type. Just wanted to say… thanks."

Aanya closed her eyes.

She wasn't writing to be known. She was writing to be real. And real things bruise.

So she opened a blank post.

"To those who screenshot sadness:
Know that we bleed with purpose.
Your cruelty has noise.
Our quiet has power."

She hit publish.

And for the first time, she didn't feel anonymous.
She felt *unafraid*.

Chapter 6: A Seat at the Front

The notice board was unusually crowded that morning.

Aanya never stopped at the notice board. She usually walked past it like most students did — unless exam timetables were posted. But today, something pulled her in.

Big bold letters, printed on glossy paper:

“State-Level Young Voices Writing Competition”

✦ Open to all students (Class 9–12)

✦ Submit original poetry, short fiction, or personal essay

✦ Top 5 entries win ₹10,000 + publication in the *New Voices Anthology*

✦ Deadline: 3 weeks

She stared at it longer than she meant to.

Aarav appeared beside her, reading it too.

“You should enter,” he said simply, as if it wasn’t a terrifying idea.

Aanya gave him a look. “And submit under what? *Ash_04?* They’ll want a name. A real one.”

“That’s the point,” he said. “Let the world know it’s you.”

But letting the world know came with weight.

For years, her writing had been the part of her that was free. Unjudged. It had survived only because it lived outside expectations. Outside marks, family pressure, and the ever-tightening noose of “What will people think?”

She could already hear the whispers if she submitted something personal.
“She wrote that?”
“It’s so dramatic.”
“Who does she think she is?”

And then there was her family.

Her father believed poetry was a hobby — fine, until it got in the way of entrance exams. Her mother supported her in quiet ways

— packed her favorite lunch when she looked tired — but never asked what she *felt*.

If she told them she was entering a writing competition, they might say, *"Good luck."*
But if she told them she *won,* they might say, *"Now focus on real things."*

Still, she thought about it all day. In class. On the bus. While brushing her teeth.

Late that night, she opened her blog and scrolled through her favorite pieces. Some were poems. Some were short, broken paragraphs that barely qualified as stories. But they all carried a pulse — hers.

She copied three of them into a Word document. Gave the file a new name: **"Aanya_Mohan_Submission.docx."**

The cursor blinked at her, like a dare.

She hovered over the "Send" button.

Then hit it.

The next morning, something strange happened. She didn't feel scared. She felt… *clean*. Like she had stopped hiding from herself.

For the first time ever, she walked into school and didn't sit in the last row. She didn't shrink into her hoodie. She didn't whisper her name during roll call.

She sat in the third row.
Not the front yet.
But close.

Chapter 7: The Call That Changed Nothing (and Everything)

It was a Tuesday again.

Funny, how life always seemed to come full circle on Tuesdays — the same day she first disappeared, years ago, behind a half-raised hand in class.

Now, the call came in just before lunch.

Aanya was in the corridor when her phone buzzed. Unknown number. She almost didn't answer — until something in her gut whispered: *Pick up*.

She did.

"Hello, is this Aanya Mohan?"
A professional voice. A man. Confident, clipped.

"Y-yes?"

"We're calling from the New Voices Competition board. Congratulations — your piece 'Wear My Quiet Like a Crown' is among our top five winners. You've won a ₹10,000 award, and we'll be featuring your work in this year's anthology. You'll receive an official invite to the award ceremony soon."

There was a pause — on their end, waiting for a reaction.
And on hers, because no words came.

"Are you there?" the man asked.

"Yes," she breathed. "I'm… here."

After the call ended, Aanya stood frozen in the empty corridor. Not joyful. Not shocked. Just… still.

She had done it.

Her words — the ones she had written in darkness, trembling, hidden — were going to be printed. In a book. With her name. Real name.

The news moved through the school like wildfire.

By the end of the day, three teachers had congratulated her. One senior girl asked if she gave "writing tuition." Someone else asked for the link to her blog.

A few classmates looked impressed. But not all. Some looked amused. Others indifferent. One girl muttered just loud enough:
"Lucky. These competitions pick weird stuff these days."

Aanya didn't respond.

She wasn't here to prove poetry mattered. She had only wanted to prove *she* did.

At home, the reactions were quieter.

Her mother smiled gently. "Ten thousand? That's good. Useful for college."

Her father raised his eyebrows. "Good. But don't get distracted. You still have your science stream to focus on. Writing doesn't guarantee anything."

They didn't ask what she had written. They didn't read it.

Aanya nodded. She didn't expect more. But part of her had still hoped.

That night, Aarav messaged her:

“So… they finally know who the fire belongs to. Proud of you.”

She replied with a single line.

“Winning didn’t change me. It just let others see what I already knew.”

But the next morning, something *had* changed.

Because for the first time in years, Aanya sat at the very front of the class — not to be noticed.
But because she no longer needed to hide.

She didn’t need the last row to feel safe anymore.
She had built safety in her words.
And now, they were out there — **alive.**

Chapter 8: Unread Messages

She didn’t check the inbox for three days.

After the announcement, her blog saw a sudden surge — comments, reblogs, new followers. Her name was now attached to her posts. Anonymous fire had become public flame. It felt… surreal.

And a little dangerous.

So she stayed away. Focused on assignments, avoided social media, told herself: *The internet will still be there later.*

On the fourth night, curiosity cracked her resolve. She opened her inbox just before sleep.

Thirty-seven new messages.

Most were kind.
Some were vague.
A few were confessions.

“I found your blog last year after a breakup. I didn’t think poems could cry until I read yours.”

“You don’t know me, but your piece about not fitting into your own skin saved me during a panic attack.”

“Thank you for being brave. I wish I had the courage to speak like you do.”

She scrolled. Each message felt like a hand, reaching into a room she thought she was alone in. She replied to a few. Liked others.

And then she saw one that made her heart slam into her ribs.

Subject line:

“Do you remember me?”

The email opened without her clicking. Gmail’s cruel auto-preview.

It was from **Mira**.

She hadn’t seen that name in years.

Mira had once been her closest friend. Not in the ordinary way — not just sharing tiffin boxes and gossip. They had *built* each other.

Middle school memories flooded in: stolen chalk, library corners, secret notebooks passed like coded letters. Mira had been the only person who ever *saw* her completely — until she didn't.

It ended in silence. No argument. Just a shift. Mira started talking to louder girls. Started laughing harder, performing confidence like a new role. Aanya stopped existing in her world.

She never asked why.

And now here she was, in the inbox, years later.

The full message read:

Hey. I'm not sure if you want to hear from me, but I found your blog. I read everything. I'm… sorry for how things ended. I think I left at the exact moment you needed someone to stay. I didn't know how to handle your quiet then. I do now. If you ever want to talk, I'm here.

– Mira.

Aanya stared at the screen. Her chest ached, and she didn't know why. She had buried that chapter. She thought she had moved on.

But some stories don't end with silence. They wait.

She didn't reply.
Not that night.

But she didn't delete the message either.

Instead, she opened her notebook — the real one, the one with ink and dog-ears and coffee stains — and wrote four words:

"Some echoes deserve answers".

Chapter 9: Breaking the Frame

Aanya hadn't spoken in front of a crowd since eighth grade.

Back then, her voice had quivered halfway through the second sentence, and someone had snickered in the third row. She'd gone silent after that. Never volunteered again.

So when Mrs. Ghosh, the English teacher, called her to the staffroom and said,

"I'm nominating you for the National Youth Forum,"
Aanya blinked.
"Me?"

"Yes. The prompt this year is *'Voices from the Margins.'* I can't think of anyone more perfect."

"But I… I don't speak. I write."

"You *do* speak," Mrs. Ghosh said gently. "Just differently. And maybe now it's time the world hears it in your voice too."

The forum was televised. A live panel. Four students from across the country. A moderator. Ten minutes to speak.

It felt like a death sentence wrapped in honour.

At night, Aanya practiced in front of the mirror. She stumbled. Rehearsed again. She printed her words, rewrote them, folded them into the spine of her notebook.

Two nights before the event, Aarav sent her a message:

"The world needs people who speak *because* they were once silent. You don't have to be perfect. Just real."

The studio in Bhubaneswar was colder than she expected. Aanya clutched her pages like a shield.

The panel began. The girl from Delhi spoke about gender. The boy from Kolkata spoke about caste. Another talked about living in a refugee camp.

Then they turned to her.

“Aanya Mohan. Poet. Student. Introvert. You’ve written about invisibility. You’ve won awards. Now you’re here. Tell us — what does ‘voice’ mean to you?”

She looked up. The lights were bright. Cameras were rolling. But she thought of something her blog readers had once written:

You made me feel less alone.

That was it. That was her why.

She unfolded the paper. Then folded it back.
And she spoke.

“Voice isn’t always loud,” she began, her words slow, sure. “Sometimes, it’s a whisper that survives storms. Sometimes, it’s ink on paper when breath runs out. And sometimes… it’s a girl who spent half her life apologizing for being quiet — standing here, telling you she no longer is.”

She paused. No one moved.

“I didn’t find my voice. I *built* it. Letter by letter. Through silence, heartbreak, and pages no one ever read. And today, if I tremble, it’s not because I’m weak. It’s because I know how strong the quiet can be… once you stop being afraid of it.”

The studio was still.

Then, applause.

Not polite. Not performative.

Real.

That night, Aanya didn't sleep.

Not from anxiety.
From energy. From aliveness. From something she couldn't quite name.

She didn't feel like she had "made it."
But she had arrived.

And for the first time, her voice didn't just fill a room —
It moved one.

Chapter 10: Letters from Strangers

The day after the broadcast, Aanya's inbox exploded.

Her blog hit twenty thousand views in one night. Her follower count doubled. She woke up to a dozen mentions, screen recordings of her speech clipped and shared with captions like:

"This girl just destroyed my silence."
"If you've ever felt invisible, watch this."
"New national crush? Nah. New national conscience."

Some were flattering. Some were odd. Some made her smile, wide and childlike.

She read as many messages as she could, replying between bites of breakfast and sips of tea.

“You said what I couldn’t.”
“My sister cried watching you.”
“I’m not quiet, but now I understand my friend who is.”

Her world had opened.

But not every message was kind.

At 3:12 p.m., she opened one titled:

“Be real.”

She should have skipped it. But curiosity was cruel.

The email had no greeting. No name. Just this:

*“You’re not brave. You’re performative.

Playing the victim in a system that favors sympathy.

There are girls smarter, braver, louder than you — who don’t cry for attention.

Enjoy your fifteen minutes. You didn’t earn it.”*

Aanya read it three times.

Not because she believed it. But because a part of her — that broken, childhood part — *almost* did.

She didn’t reply.
She closed the laptop and walked out of the room.

The air outside felt heavier than usual. Or maybe her chest was.

She sat on the swing in the park nearby, legs pulled in like armor. A little boy ran past with an ice cream. A dog barked at nothing. Life moved.

And she sat still.

When she got home, she didn’t write. For the first time in weeks, she couldn’t. The words jammed in her throat.

Later that night, she checked her blog again. A new comment had been posted anonymously, under the speech video:

*“You taught me that being quiet isn’t weakness.
It’s just power waiting for the right moment to speak.

Thank you, Aanya.

Don’t stop.”*

She didn’t know who had written it.

But it reminded her: for every voice that tries to tear you down, there’s another whisper, waiting to catch you.

So she picked up her pen. She wrote a short poem. No title. Just this:

“Not all knives are metal.
Some are made of words.
But not all wounds bleed.
Some bloom.”

Chapter 11: Ashes and Ink

Aanya didn’t know why she sent that poem to Aarav. Maybe because he was the first to see her when she hadn’t yet seen herself. Or maybe because she hoped he’d understand it the way she meant it — not just words, but survival.

He replied within minutes.

*“You wrote this?

It hurts in the best way possible.

I’ve been meaning to tell you something.”*

She stared at the message for a long time. The typing bubble appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Finally:

*“I didn’t just send your blog to the Youth Forum people.

I sent it to a publisher.”*

Aanya’s heart thudded once, hard.

“What?”

“I didn’t ask first because I knew you’d say no. I just… believed in it. In you.”

“What did they say?”

“They want to talk. One of their editors read your post titled ‘The Quiet Revolution.’ She cried. Said you sound like the voice her teenage daughter needed.”

“You should’ve told me, Aarav.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I got carried away by the idea that maybe the world should hold your words in its hands — not just on screens.”

“A book?”

“Yeah. Your story. Your words. In ink.”

That night, Aanya lay in bed staring at the ceiling fan. Her walls were still covered in pinned-up poems, drafts, and reminders to breathe. But this time, there was something else:

Possibility.

A book.
Her name on a spine.
Her silence turned tangible.

Not for fame. Not for followers. But for every kid like her — who thought quietness meant unimportance.

But the fear returned, too.

What if I'm not enough? What if this is all just a pretty lie I wrote well?

She opened her journal.
Wrote down a single sentence:

"It's okay if I'm scared. Ink only matters when it meets the page."

Then she added a second:

"I'll meet it."

Chapter 12 – Paper Cuts and Proposals

Aanya stared at the email for what felt like a century.

"We are delighted to offer you a publishing contract for your manuscript, pending minor edits…"

Her heart raced. She blinked, read it again. Then again.

It was real. Not a competition certificate. Not a participation badge. A real offer. A publishing contract — her name on paper, her words in print.

But before joy could plant its roots, doubt began to water them.

She ran to her mother, phone trembling in her hand. "Ma! They want to publish my book!"

Her mother looked up from the kitchen with a curious smile, half busy flipping rotis. "Who?"

"A real publisher. Proper editing, royalties, everything!"

Her mother blinked. “Hmm. That’s good… But what does Papa say?”

That was the real question, wasn't it?

That evening, over dinner, Aanya laid out the email on the table like a confession letter.

Her father looked at it through his glasses, silent. His expression unreadable. Finally, he said:
“Will this help you clear NEET?”

“No, Papa,” she said softly, “but it might help me clear my life.”

His face tightened. “Writing is a hobby, Aanya. Not a profession. You know how unstable this is.”

“But it’s *mine,*” she whispered.

He didn’t reply.

That night, under the soft blue light of her study lamp, Aanya stared at the unsigned contract. Her dreams were no longer dreams. They had addresses. Emails. Logos. Deadlines.

But they also had costs.

She thought of her thirteen-year-old self, crying into a diary after yet another failed chemistry test.
Of all the unsent letters she wrote to herself. Of the rejections. The self-doubt.

She wasn’t sure whether this offer would change everything. But she knew one thing:

She was no longer asking for permission.

She was writing her name — not just on paper, but into the world.

With a deep breath, she clicked *Reply*.

"Thank you. I accept."

Chapter 13: The Line She Drew

The contract sat on the table, untouched.

It had a glossy cover. Black and gold. "Author Agreement – Amarya Books." Her name typed just below in bold serif font: *Aanya Mohan*.

Her hands didn't reach for it.

Her father leaned back in the dining chair, arms crossed.
"I don't like it," he said flatly. "You're 18. Still in school. Publishing a book? It's not a job."

"It's not a distraction either," she replied quietly.

"You want to be a writer?" he scoffed. "That's not a plan, Aanya. That's a hobby."

Across the table, her mother stayed silent. Like always.

Her sister, Tanvi, barely looked up from her phone.

The only one who had read the manuscript was Aarav. And the editor from Amarya.

Everyone else only saw the cover. Not the courage it took to create it.

Later that night, Aarav video-called her.

She didn’t cry. She didn’t rage. She just stared at the screen and said:

“Do you think he’s right? That I’m being stupid?”

Aarav exhaled slowly.
“No. But I think he’s scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“That you might become more than what he understands.”

The next morning, Aanya called the editor — *Rhea Talwar*.

“Hi. This is Aanya Mohan.”

“Ah, my favorite wordsmith! I hope the contract didn’t scare you off?”

Aanya smiled despite herself.
“Not scared. Just… thinking.”

Rhea waited.

“I want to do this,” Aanya said, voice firm. “But I need to set some boundaries.”

“Okay,” Rhea said, intrigued. “Let’s hear them.”

And for the first time, Aanya *negotiated*.

She asked for full creative control over her title. She requested her own illustration for the cover — a drawing she once made of a girl sitting inside a teacup filled with words.

She refused the suggestion to “make it a love story for more engagement.”
And she rejected the rewrite that softened the chapter on depression.

“This isn’t a feel-good fantasy,” she said. “It’s survival. And survival is raw.”

Rhea was quiet for a moment.

Then:
“Deal.”

That evening, Aanya signed the contract.

Her hands didn’t tremble.

Her story — *Ink from the Ashes* — wasn’t just hers anymore. It would belong to thousands of others. Readers who needed to remember that silence is not the absence of strength — it's the space before it rises.

Chapter 14: Burn the Draft

The manuscript was done. Or so everyone thought.

But Aanya stared at the final file on her laptop with unease crawling under her skin. The words were there. The pages turned. But something felt… off.

Too polished. Too perfect.

It didn’t feel like *her*.

She knew what happened — she’d overedited. Trying to sound wiser. Braver. More “literary.” Somewhere along the way, her raw voice had been smoothed into submission.

She messaged Aarav:

“I think I ruined it.”

He called immediately.
“Tell me what’s going on.”

“I rewrote the hard chapters. Took out the stammering lines. The awkward ones. Even that bit where I talked about hiding in the school bathroom because my voice shook in front of people.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought no one would want to read that.”

A pause.

“Then why did they love you in the first place?” he asked gently.

Two days later, she made a decision.

She took a train to her hometown. Alone.

It was the same route she’d once taken, with shaking knees and a heavy duffel bag, leaving behind the memories she thought would break her.

This time, she came back not to escape — but to reclaim.

Her old school hadn’t changed much. The faded red gates. The dusty sports ground. The teacher’s noticeboard still littered with mismatched font sizes.

She sat on the stone bench near the library — the one she’d often escaped to between periods.

A group of 9th graders passed by giggling. One of them — a girl with oversized glasses and a crooked braid — dropped her books.

Aanya helped her pick them up. The girl looked up, stunned.

“You’re… you’re Aanya Mohan,” she whispered.

Aanya blinked.
“Yes?”

“I read your blog. *The Quiet Revolution*. We studied it in English last month.”

“You *what*?”

“They printed it. In our reader. We all had to write essays about what silence meant to us.”

Aanya froze. “What did you write?”

The girl hesitated, then recited softly:

“Silence is not the opposite of voice.
It is the waiting room where it learns to grow.”

Aanya sat down, hard.

She didn't need to rewrite the book.

She needed to *undo* the rewrite.

That night, back in her room, she opened the over-edited draft.

And deleted it.

Every line that sounded like someone else. Every paragraph that flinched away from truth.

She started again — this time not as an “author,” but as the girl on the bench. The one who once trembled but never stopped trying.

The real version of *Ink from the Ashes* was finally being born.

Chapter 15: Girl in the Mirror

The mirror in Aanya's room was old — speckled, slightly cracked at the corner. She hadn't really *seen* herself in it for years.

She'd look *through* it, mostly. Not *into* it.

But tonight, after rewriting the manuscript from scratch, she stood there — facing her reflection. Not to adjust her hair. Not to inspect a pimple. But to ask a question.

"Do I deserve this?"

The girl in the mirror didn't blink.

She had the same messy bun, the same faded hoodie with "Stay Kind" half-peeled off. But her eyes… they were different.

Not brighter. Not calmer. Just more *real*.

Aanya stepped closer.

She whispered:
"I'm sorry."

For every time she let shame win. For the years she silenced herself before anyone else had to. For believing she had to earn the right to speak.

"I'm sorry for hating you when you were only trying to survive."

Her reflection shimmered, not with tears — but with release.

She remembered one afternoon when she was thirteen. Sitting on the bathroom floor at school, after a teacher made her read

aloud in class. Her voice had cracked halfway. Someone had snorted.

Later, someone else called her *mute Mohan*.

She'd come home that day, looked in the mirror, and said:

"If I can't talk without breaking, maybe I should just stop trying."

That voice still lived somewhere in her. Quiet. Frightened.

But now, another voice spoke back.

"You didn't break.

You wrote.

You lived."

She pulled out her notebook — the one she'd hidden under her mattress. Pages yellowed, corners folded, margins filled with half-finished stanzas.

In one of them, dated two years ago, she'd written:

"I do not hate you,
but I don't know how to love you either."

Tonight, she added:

"But I will try.
One page at a time."

Later, Aarav messaged her.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just met someone I haven't seen in years."

"Who?"

“The girl in the mirror.
She’s still here.
And I think I’m ready to listen.”

Chapter 16: Pages in Motion

The day the cover reveal went live, Aanya was in her room — pacing, heart thrumming like a dhol during Ganesh Chaturthi.

Rhea had emailed:

“Going live at 4 PM.

Be ready for everything: the love, the noise… and the opinions.”

And just like that, at 4:01 PM, the post dropped.

* 📘 Ink from the Ashes — A debut that whispers loud.

Pre-orders open now. #RiseFromSilence #AanyaMohan*

Within minutes, the comments poured in.

🔥 “This is GORGEOUS.”
💬 “Never thought silence could look so powerful.”
👀 “Who is this girl and how can I be her friend?”

And then—

💥 “Didn’t she used to be that quiet freak in school?”
😐 “Lol, since when did mental breakdowns become marketable?”

Aanya froze.

At first, she tried to scroll past. Block. Ignore.

But the words seeped in like ink through cheap paper.

She saw a familiar name — *Ridhi Sharma*.

Ridhi had been her classmate in 10th. The one with the perfectly straight hair, always at the center of every group photo. The one who once told Aanya, “You should smile less. It looks forced.”

Now, Ridhi had shared the post with her own caption:

*“Surprised she can write a whole book when she barely talked in school.

Guess trauma sells.”*

Aanya didn’t cry.

She closed the app, turned off her phone, and opened her manuscript.

She went to Chapter 6 — the one that described her time in school.

The paragraph she had once softened…
She deleted it.

And she wrote the truth.

*“No one likes a quiet girl — until she speaks loud enough to be published.

Then, suddenly, everyone remembers you.”*

Two hours later, she got a call from Rhea.

“I saw that post,” Rhea said, calm but firm.

“I don’t want to be in a controversy.”

“This isn’t a controversy, Aanya. It’s your *past*. It just doesn’t want to stay silent.”

“I don’t want to explain myself.”

“You don’t have to.”

Pause.

“But… are you proud of the work?”

Aanya inhaled.

“Yes.”

“Then let them talk. Your pages are already in motion. Let the ink run ahead of the noise.”

Later that night, Aarav sent her a photo.

It was a screenshot of a DM he’d received.

From Ridhi.

“Aanya’s really milking her sob story, huh? You were her friend. You’d know.”

Aarav hadn’t replied. But he had sent Aanya the screenshot with one sentence:

“You don’t need to reply either. Your silence is no longer empty — it’s earned.”

Chapter 17: Mother, Unspoken

Aanya hadn’t meant to snoop.

She was just helping Ma reorganize the top shelf — the one with faded saris, dry mango pickle jars, and forgotten Diwali diyas.

That’s when her fingers brushed against something cloth-bound and oddly weighty.

A journal.

The pages smelled of old rain and time.

Property of Nirmala Mohan.
If you find this, read only if you’re brave enough.

Aanya stared at her mother — now across the room, humming faintly while dusting off a photo frame.

She slipped the journal into her hoodie.

She *was* brave enough now.

That night, with the lamp dim and the fan spinning shadows on her ceiling, Aanya opened the first page.

The handwriting surprised her.

Not neat, not graceful — but urgent. Like the words were being pulled out faster than the hand could manage.

The first entry was dated **June 1995.**

“I wish I could say it loud.
That I wanted more.
That the silence I live in isn’t peace. It’s permission.
Permission to not be a problem.”

Page after page, Nirmala had written things Aanya never imagined.

Dreams of being a classical dancer. Fear of marriage.
Loneliness after moving cities.

A heartbreak before Papa.
A miscarriage before Aanya.

“I look strong to others, but I feel like a rusted gate — heavy, unmoving, and always holding something back.”

Aanya felt her throat tighten.

She had always wondered where she got it — the weight, the pause before speaking, the buried ache.

Now she knew.

One entry, written when Aanya was only four, stood out:

“She talks less than other kids.
The teachers say she’s shy.
But I wonder… did she learn it from watching me?”

Tears welled.

All this time, Aanya thought she was alone in her silence.

But her mother had been screaming quietly beside her all along.

The final entry was dated **Aanya’s 18th birthday.**

“She’ll leave soon. She’s growing wings I never had.
I hope she speaks for both of us.”

Aanya closed the journal and held it to her chest.

She thought about the day her book would come out. The launch. The stage. The inevitable question:

“Who inspired you to write this?”

And now, she knew her answer.

The next morning, she handed the journal back to her mother — silently, with misty eyes.

Ma didn't ask if she read it.

She simply cupped her daughter's cheek and said,

"Make sure your daughter doesn't inherit this silence. Let her hear your story."

Chapter 18: The First Launch

The bookstore was packed.

Chairs spilled into the aisles. Fairy lights tangled with camera cables. A giant poster of *Ink from the Ashes* stood beside the stage — Aanya's name glinting under yellow bulbs.

She sat backstage with Rhea and Aarav, her palms sweating through her kurti sleeves.

"Don't throw up," Aarav whispered, grinning.

"I won't," she said.
"I'll faint first."

When her name was called, the applause was thunderous.

Not polite. Not pitiful.
Proud.

She stepped onto the stage, into the spotlight. The mic waited.

She glanced at the first row.

Her mother sat in a light blue sari, her eyes bright and full. Her father — stiff, but present.

Aarav stood near the back, filming.
Even Ridhi was there — not clapping, but not leaving either.

Rhea introduced her with warmth and flair, then passed the mic.

“And now, the girl who turned silence into scripture — Aanya Mohan.”

Aanya took the mic, heart pounding.

“Hi… I’m Aanya,” she began.

“I wasn’t always someone who could stand here.
I wasn’t always someone you noticed.
I spent a lot of time being quiet. But not because I had nothing to say.
Just… because I didn’t believe anyone wanted to hear it.”

She paused. The silence in the room held her like a gentle hand.

“This book isn’t just mine. It belongs to everyone who ever wrote poems they never showed anyone.
Everyone who was told to speak up but never asked, *‘Why are you quiet?’ with kindness*.

If this book does anything — I hope it helps someone feel seen.”

Applause again. Some soft sniffles. One loud “Woooo!”

Probably Aarav.

The Q&A session began.

First, a girl asked about Aanya’s writing process.

Then, a teacher asked how to support introverted students.

Then… a boy in the third row stood up.

“I wanted to ask,” he said, “you wrote about a breakdown in your school years… Did anyone help you through that time?”

Aanya froze.

Her fingers curled around the mic.

That time — the cutting, the crying behind the locked washroom door, the counselling forms she’d torn up before submitting…

“No one helped me,” she said honestly. “Because no one knew.
Or maybe… no one wanted to look too closely.
But I survived anyway. Because eventually, I decided *I* mattered — even when no one else seemed to say it.”

The boy nodded slowly. He sat down.

After the event, the boy approached her.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’m… kinda still in that place.”

She signed his copy.

“Then this story’s already yours,” she said softly.
“You just haven’t written your last chapter yet.”

That night, back in her room, she opened her book to the dedication page:

To the girl I used to be — you didn’t stay broken.
And to the girl I’ve become — don’t forget her.

Chapter 19: Viral, Again

The first time Aanya went viral, it nearly broke her.

The second time, it changed her life.

It was a 53-second clip—her answer to the boy who'd asked about her breakdown during the book launch Q&A.

"No one helped me… But I survived anyway. Because eventually, I decided I mattered—even when no one else seemed to say it."

It was raw. Unscripted. Real.

And apparently, that's all it took.

By the next morning, the clip had over **300,000 views**.

By evening, it was **1.2 million**.

Someone had subtitled it in Hindi, Tamil, and Bengali. A popular Instagram poet reposted it with:

"She said what I couldn't."

Then came the interviews. Podcasts. Collabs. Twitter threads with 40k likes. An education NGO messaged, asking if she could be a youth ambassador.

Then—**"The Voice Within"**, a nationally televised talk show, called.

"They want you as a guest speaker," Rhea said, scrolling through the email. "You'll sit next to Dr. Vedika Arora! And the poet who wrote *Letters to My Panic Attacks!*"

Aanya didn't respond. Her hands were shaking slightly.

Aarav, seated across the room, noticed.

"You okay?"

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just… I didn’t sign up for *all* this.”

“You signed up to be heard,” he said gently. “You just didn’t expect so many people to listen.”

With visibility came shadows.

The trolls arrived.

“Overrated trauma-dumping.”
“Another Gen-Z snowflake pretending to be deep.”
“You think this is bravery? Go work in a mine.”

And the worst ones:

“Why didn’t she just get over it? Everyone has problems.”

She closed her DMs.

She stopped checking comments.

But one day, a girl from Darjeeling messaged her privately:

“I saw your clip. Showed it to my mom. We cried together. First time she told me she had depression too.”

That made it worth it again.

The talk show appearance loomed.

Rhea was ecstatic. Aarav supportive. Even Ma said, “I’ll wear my red saree and sit with your papa.”

But Aanya was torn.

The more attention she got, the more she felt like she was *performing pain*. That she was expected to be sad, soft-spoken, poetic.

What if she laughed too much? What if she didn’t cry?

What if people liked her *less* if she healed?

The night before the shoot, Aarav found her in the campus garden, staring at the koi pond.

“You’re afraid,” he said.

“Of becoming what I hated,” she replied. “A pretty package of pain, palatable for screens.”

“Then don’t perform. Speak.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“No. But nothing you’ve done so far was.”

She went.

Not because she wanted the spotlight.

But because somewhere out there, another girl like her was still alone in the dark, wondering if her story mattered.

On stage, under brighter lights than she’d ever known, the host asked:

“If you could speak to your 15-year-old self right now… what would you say?”

Aanya looked into the camera.

“I’d say—
You were never invisible.
They just weren’t looking properly.”

Chapter 20: Unfollow Me Gently

There’s a kind of fame that feels like drowning in petals.
Beautiful. Fragrant. Soft.
But still—suffocating.

Aanya felt that kind.

After the talk show aired, everything exploded again.

1.9 million views.
Fan edits. Reaction videos. Brands requesting collaborations.
Even a politician quoted her during a mental health campaign.

She smiled for the cameras. She answered interviews.
She played the part.

Until she couldn't.

It started subtly.

She began avoiding her phone.
Then her reflection.
Then the blinking cursor on her writing app.

Aarav noticed.

“You’re shrinking,” he said, handing her a mango popsicle. “You okay?”

She bit into the cold sweetness, grateful for something real.

“I don’t know who I’m writing for anymore,” she admitted.
“Them? Me? My past self? Their future selves? It’s all tangled.”

“You’re allowed to stop performing,” he said.
“You’re not a lighthouse. You don’t have to burn to guide others.”

So, she did the unthinkable.

She vanished.

No post, no announcement.

She deactivated her social media accounts.
Canceled two panel invites.
Turned down a mental health campaign ad collaboration that offered **₹4 lakh**.

The internet noticed.

“Where is Aanya Mohan?”
“Mental health poet goes offline. Ironic?”
“She was never built for the spotlight.”

They called her ungrateful. Fragile. Fake.

But they didn’t know she was in her childhood bedroom, curled up with a tattered book of Rabindranath Tagore poems and old school notebooks full of margin scribbles.

They didn’t see the moment her mom walked in quietly, placed a cup of warm turmeric milk by her side, and whispered:

“You don’t have to carry the world. You’re still just our Aanya.”

For the first time in weeks, Aanya wrote.

Not for applause.

Not for a quote-card.

Just for herself.

A short piece. Untitled. Scribbled with smudged ink.

“I am not a wound in a dress.
I am not your hope anthem.

I am a girl who lived—
and that, too, is enough.”

Two weeks later, she returned. Quietly.

Just one post. No selfies. No hashtags.

It read:

“Sometimes healing means being invisible again.
Thank you for holding space for me.
I’m still here. Just softer.”

Her follower count dropped by thousands.

But the people who stayed were the ones who mattered.

People like Neha from Guwahati, who wrote:

“I followed you for your words.
I stayed for your silence.”

Chapter 21: The Workshop

The invitation came on a cloudy Wednesday, buried in a thread of unread emails.

Subject: *Would you like to inspire?*

It was from *The Paper Lantern Project*—a quiet NGO in Bhubaneswar that worked with teenage girls from vulnerable homes: survivors of abuse, abandoned children, dropouts trying to find a way back to school.

They wanted Aanya to run a three-day creative writing workshop.

No fee. No media.

Just fifteen girls. Fifteen unheard stories.

She almost said no.

She wasn't a teacher. She wasn't certified. She wasn't… healed enough.

But then she remembered the girl she used to be—fifteen, broken, scribbling poems in the margins of biology notes.

And she whispered yes.

The shelter wasn't much—peeling blue walls, creaking fans, a noticeboard filled with uneven smiles and glitter glue quotes.

But the girls?
They were fire and lightning.

Shristi, who wanted to write horror stories with haunted orphanages.
Khushbu, who wrote in Odia and refused to translate for anyone.
Meera, who never spoke but left a poem about drowning on Aanya's chair each day.

On the first day, Aanya asked:

"What's one thing you've never told anyone?"

One girl whispered:

"That I still sleep with my shoes on… in case I have to run again."

Aanya didn't cry.
She handed her a pen.

The workshop wasn’t about metaphors or grammar.

It was about unlocking.

They wrote letters they’d never send.
Dreamt alternate endings to their worst memories.
Wrote ‘obituary poems’ for the names their abusers called them.

"Here lies 'Useless'.
Buried under new words: Brave. Loud. Rewritten."

On the final day, they read their work aloud.

No mics. No cameras.
Just claps, tears, and shy laughter.

Afterward, Meera walked up, held out her notebook, and muttered:

“This… I wrote about you.”

Aanya opened it.

“She walks like silence
but speaks like thunder.
We thought we were broken.
But she showed us we were art.”

That night, Aanya sat on the rooftop of her guesthouse, barefoot, under stars unfamiliar and kind.

She didn’t post anything online.

She didn’t need to.

Some echoes don’t need amplification.

Some stories are loud even in whispers.

Chapter 22: Rhea's Room

Rhea never cried.

She could rage, rant, roll her eyes, break the rules, and build them again — but tears? They were not in her vocabulary.

At least, not in public.

That's why Aanya froze when she opened Rhea's bedroom door and saw her best friend curled up in a quilt, muffling sobs into a stuffed elephant she had once mockingly named *"Emo"*.

The room smelled of jasmine oil and missed calls.

Aanya stepped in slowly.

"Want to talk?"

Rhea didn't move.

"No.
But stay."

It was 11:41 p.m. on a Saturday night. The city outside buzzed with honking and heartbreaks. Inside, two girls sat in silence — one finally unravelling, the other learning how to hold space.

After ten minutes, Rhea whispered:

"I failed.
At everything.
At being fine.
At pretending.
At keeping it together."

Aanya wanted to say *“No, you didn’t.”*
But she didn’t.

Instead, she held Rhea’s hand and said:

“Okay. Then let’s fail together tonight. No medals. No filters. Just… be.”

The unraveling came slow and jagged.

Rhea had been offered a high-paying corporate internship. She had said yes out of pressure, not passion. She’d lost three kilos in two weeks, started biting her nails again, and had deleted all her poems.

“I don’t want to be someone’s success story if I’m falling apart behind the scenes,” she muttered.

Aanya blinked.

She had said the same thing once.

They spent the night rebuilding each other.

They read old emails from their school years.
Laughed at their cringey Tumblr bios.
Rhea showed Aanya a secret folder titled *“Unposted Poems.”*

One read:

“I’m the hero in your story,
But the ghost in mine.”

Aanya held it like a sacred script.

“Post this. You have to.”

Rhea shook her head.

“I’m not brave like you.”

Aanya smiled.

“Then be scared. And do it anyway.”

At 3:04 a.m., Rhea finally slept.

Aanya tiptoed out, leaving a Post-it on her desk lamp.

“Courage isn’t loud.
It’s just you, whispering: ‘Maybe I’ll try again tomorrow.’”

Chapter 23: Notes on a Wall

The college looked smaller.

Or maybe Aanya had just grown too much to fit inside the old version of it.

She walked through the gate quietly, a hoodie over her head and headphones in her ears—though nothing was playing. She just needed a shield. A buffer between the world and her thoughts.

She wasn’t there to speak.
Not for a talk.
Not to be honored.
She was just visiting.

Curious. Cautious.
Pulled by memory.

It happened in the third-floor girl’s bathroom.

She pushed open the blue-painted door expecting silence and flickering tube lights.

Instead, she found it.

The Wall.

It was never “official.”

But everyone knew about it.

A place where confessions lived.
Where girls scribbled poems in pen, eyeliner, or blood.
Where rage met resilience, and heartbreak turned into haikus.

Aanya had written there once.
A single line, three years ago:

“I don’t want to be beautiful if I have to be broken for it.”

She had forgotten about it. But someone hadn’t.

The wall had grown like ivy.

Now it was full of quotes.
Lines from her book.
Verses she barely remembered writing.
Rewritten, circled, argued with.

Like this one:

“Some girls are made of thunder.”
— Someone had scratched under it:
“And some are tired of lightning.”

Another:

“You are not your scars.”
— Beneath it, a reply in neat blue pen:
“But they do tell stories, don’t they?”

She stood there, stunned.

Her words were no longer hers.
They had been claimed, repurposed, reinterpreted.
They had become… communal.

She took out her own pen.
Wrote under her old quote.

“I didn’t know anyone was listening.
Thank you for proving me wrong.”

A girl entered the bathroom, saw her writing, and froze.

Aanya smiled awkwardly, ready to leave.

But the girl just said:

“Hey… I added the lightning one.
I didn’t mean it badly.”

Aanya chuckled.

“You didn’t.
You just added your verse.
That’s what poetry’s for.”

Later that night, she wrote a journal entry.

“Impact isn’t applause.
It’s echoes in strange places.
It’s being quoted on a bathroom wall
by a girl you’ve never met.”

Chapter 24: The Letter She Never Sent

It had been sitting there for **four years**.

In her Gmail drafts.
Untitled.
Unread.
Unsent.

It was dated the night after her second breakdown—the one no one talked about. The one even she had blurred into sleep and denial.

The letter to her father.

Aanya had forgotten about it.

Until she opened her inbox to send an article to a magazine editor and accidentally clicked on “Drafts.”

There it was.
Like a ghost that had patiently waited.

She hesitated.
Hovered.
Clicked.

And read.

“Hi Baba,

I know we don’t talk much anymore.
I know I was supposed to be stronger.
I know you never meant to break me,

but silence from a father
can echo louder than any scream.”*

Her breath caught.

She kept reading.

---

*“I failed biology today.
And also math.
And also at pretending that I’m okay.

I think I cried in the bathroom for 43 minutes.
I counted.
I had nothing else to do.”*

*“You always said ‘Don’t be dramatic.’
So I’ve learned to be quiet.

I hide my panic attacks like unpaid bills.
Fold my sadness into notebooks you’ll never open.

But Baba…
I miss you.
I miss you asking how my day was.
I miss you remembering my favorite shade of blue.

I miss the version of you who called me *‘beta’*
without disappointment in your tone.”*

She paused there.

Not because she couldn’t go on.
But because it was enough.

The rest of the draft was jumbled thoughts.
Half-typed memories.
No punctuation.

A 16-year-old's scream into digital void.

Now, at 21, Aanya read it again.

Not with anger.
Not with shame.

But with **gentleness**.

She didn't edit it.

She didn't rewrite it.

She just added a new line at the bottom:

"I survived, Baba.
Without apologies.
I hope one day, you learn how to live too."

And for the first time in five years…
She hit **Send**.

She didn't expect a reply.

This wasn't for him.

It was for the girl who had typed that letter, shaking.
The one who believed no one would ever understand her.

This was for *her*.

Chapter 25: The Stage

Aanya adjusted the mic.

The hall was packed — red velvet chairs filled with readers, writers, critics, and strangers holding copies of *Ink from the*

Ashes. Some dog-eared. Some pristine. One had post-its poking out like petals.

The banner behind her read:

“LitVerse ’25: Stories That Heal.”

And she was the closing speaker.

She had tried to cancel three times.

But somehow, she was here. Onstage. Under warm yellow lights. Her palms sweaty but her spine unshaking.

The host had introduced her as:

“Aanya Roy — poet, survivor, author of the book that taught a generation how to bleed without shame.”

She wanted to laugh.

She had written it in a dark corner of her hostel, with a blanket over her head and the Wi-Fi cutting off every hour.

She wasn’t trying to teach anyone anything.

She was trying to not fall apart.

She looked at the mic. Then the audience.
She took a breath, the kind that starts in your gut and ends in your chest.

“Hi. I’m Aanya.
And this book wasn’t meant to be a book.
It was a lifeline.”

Silence. The good kind. The listening kind.

“I wrote *Ink from the Ashes* at a time when I didn’t know if I’d ever feel safe in my own skin again.
I didn’t think anyone would read it.
I didn’t even think I’d survive to finish it.”

“But here’s the truth:
Pain, when written down, becomes art.
And art, when shared, becomes survival.”

She saw a girl in the third row crying silently.
A boy at the back holding his chest.
A woman in her thirties, nodding like she was rewriting her own story in her mind.

“You don’t need to have it all figured out.
You just need to write your truth.
Even if your voice shakes.
Especially if your voice shakes.”

“And if your story feels too messy, too ugly, too unfinished—
Remember this:
Ink is just ash that refused to disappear.”

When she stepped down, the applause didn’t feel loud.

It felt… steady.

Like a heartbeat.

A young girl approached her after.

“Your book made me stop deleting my drafts,” she whispered.

Another gave her a folded note:

“You gave me the words I didn’t know I was allowed to say.”

Aanya tucked it into her pocket like treasure.

That night, she looked in the mirror and didn’t see a survivor.

She saw a storyteller.

Not because she had healed completely.

But because she wasn’t afraid to keep speaking — even from the wounds.

Chapter 26: Letters from Strangers

They arrived in a brown envelope.

No return address.
No stamp.
Just slipped under her door, tied with a red thread.

Inside: *seventeen handwritten letters.*
Folded pages. Crumpled corners. Some scented, some tear-stained.

All from strangers.

All about her book.

The first was from a girl in a Delhi hostel:

“Your line — ‘The body remembers what the mouth forgets’ — made me cry in the shower for forty minutes. It was the first time I didn’t hate myself for crying.”

The second was from a boy in Jamshedpur:

“I underlined your poems with a blue pen until the paper tore.
I thought poetry was for people who wore turtlenecks and drank wine. Now I know it’s for people like me too.”

And then… there was **one**, written in bold strokes. No name. Just the initial:

“— R.”

Her fingers trembled slightly as she unfolded it.

The paper was thick, like something from a typewriter age. The ink bled a little at the corners.

The letter read:

“Aanya—
I found your book in a bookstore I wasn’t supposed to enter.
I bought it with my last 200 rupees.
I finished it the same night.”

“I’ve never sent a fan letter before.
But this isn’t one.
This is a confession.”

She paused. Re-read the word. *Confession.*

“Four years ago, at a coaching institute in Kota…
I knew a girl.
She used to sit two rows behind me.
Quiet.
Always doodling in her notes.
Once, I saw her crying during a chemistry mock test.
I didn’t say anything.”

“Your chapter about that test centre… the AC humming… the invigilator’s indifferent eyes…
It was her.”

“I don’t know if you’re that girl.
But if you are—
I’m sorry I didn’t say something then.”

“I see now that silence can wound, too.”

“And if you’re not her, tell her this for me—
Tell her she mattered.
Tell her I remember.”

— R.

Aanya didn’t cry.

But her chest felt like a glass that had just been tapped gently, and cracked all the way through.

She folded the letter slowly. Pressed it to her heart.

She didn’t know who “R.” was.
But somehow, that made the message feel even more real.
Not just for her — for every version of her that ever sat in silence, waiting for someone to notice.

That night, she posted on Instagram:

“To the ones who watch and don’t speak:
Your silence writes stories too.
Make sure they’re the kind worth reading.”

Chapter 27: The City Where She Lost Her Voice

Kota.

Aanya hadn't said the name out loud in years.
It used to feel like a blade in her mouth. Now it tasted like dust — distant, dull, but still there.

She arrived on a Tuesday. No cameras. No speeches. Just her and her worn-out sneakers, standing in front of the old coaching center like a ghost revisiting its own life.

The building hadn't changed much.

Same pale blue walls.
Same dull flex banners advertising AIR 1 and 2 and 5 and 9.
Same silence hanging like a fog around the trees outside.

But Aanya had changed.

Her breath no longer faltered at the gates.
Her eyes didn't dart around, searching for exits.
She walked in — slow, steady, like a survivor reclaiming a battlefield.

She visited the library.

The same corner table was still there.
The one where she used to sit — drawing butterflies in margins while pretending to revise thermodynamics.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a sticky note.
Wrote in black ink:

“You are allowed to rest.
You are allowed to stay.”

And stuck it under the table. Quietly. For someone else to find.

Next stop: the terrace.

That was the place she used to cry.

Where she called her best friend and didn’t speak. Just breathed into the receiver until they hung up, worried or exhausted.

The railing was chipped now.
The view just as gray and crowded.

But this time, Aanya didn’t cry.

She exhaled.

A long, slow breath that felt like uncaging a bird.

She walked through the old hostel gate one last time.

The warden had changed.
The guards didn’t recognize her.
But the building stood — balconies lined with laundry, echoing with the same quiet grief of dreams heavy with expectation.

On the wall beside the stairs, she etched a small symbol with her nail:

A butterfly.

Because she had once promised herself:
If I ever get out of this place alive, I’ll come back and leave proof that I did.

Later that evening, she sat on the rooftop of a tiny chai stall nearby — the same one she and Srishti used to visit after mock tests.

She stirred her tea and watched the sun disappear behind a row of coaching centers.

A group of students walked past — two boys, a girl with her hair tied in a nervous bun, a backpack filled with future and fear.

She smiled.

The city hadn't changed.

But this time, she wasn't here to be tested.

She was here to *witness*.

And maybe, to forgive.

Not just the city.

But herself.

Chapter 28: Ash Letters

It started the day after she returned from Kota.

A single paper crane lay on her doorstep.

No name. No message.
Just folded wings, burned slightly at the tips.
As if it had flown through fire to get there.

Inside was a note:

"For every time you wanted to speak and couldn't—
I'm listening now."

It wasn't signed.

But Aanya knew what it was.

An *Ash Letter*.

Back in Kota, they used to call the cruel anonymous notes "Ash Letters" — scraps of paper slipped under hostel doors, mocking girls who cried too much, who failed too often, who dared to dream differently.

She had burned many.
Some she kept.

She never thought one would bring comfort.

But then came a second.

This one was folded into a star:

"I failed NEET three times.
Everyone thinks I'm weak.
But your book made me believe failing isn't the end—
it's just the middle."

The third arrived a week later.

Folded like a heart, with lines smudged in blue ink.

"My sister took her life last year.
She was a coaching student.
I never knew how much pressure she hid.
Reading your words gave me the apology I never got from her teachers, her peers, or myself."

Aanya began collecting them.

She placed each note inside a box she labeled: **"Ashes That Didn't Hurt."**

The irony wasn't lost on her.

Once, paper destroyed her.
Now, it was rebuilding her — note by note, story by story.

Some letters were only a sentence long.

"I read your chapter on depression five times.
Still breathing."

"My mom read your book with me.
She finally understood."

"Your poem about silence? That was my childhood."

Each letter lit something in her — not a flame of anger or grief, but of connection.

She wasn't writing *for* them anymore.
She was writing *with* them.

Then came the final one.

No origami.

Just a neatly folded A4 sheet.

Typed.

"Dear Aanya,
I was your chemistry teacher in 2019.

You probably don't remember me.
But I remember you."

"I remember the day you submitted a blank answer sheet.
I remember I marked you as absent — not out of cruelty, but because I didn't know how to help a student so visibly drowning."

"When I read your book, I wept."

"We are not taught how to notice pain that hides behind performance.
We're told to push, push, push.
And I'm sorry I pushed too hard."

"I wanted to tell you…
You taught me more than I ever taught you."

"Keep writing.
Keep burning.
And keep rising."

– Mr. Deshmukh

Aanya closed her eyes.

The world wasn't different.
People still failed.
Still broke.
Still stayed silent when they should've spoken.

But it wasn't all ashes now.

There were *embers*.
And embers meant warmth.
And warmth meant life.

Chapter 29: Blue Butterflies, Again

The auditorium was packed.

Rows of students in white ID cards.
Teachers seated in the front row with polite claps.
A banner behind the stage read:
“Mental Health Matters: Voices That Lived Through the Silence”

Aanya adjusted the mic.
Her palms were sweating.

Funny, she thought.
She could write a thousand pages about pain…
But a room full of teenagers still made her knees tremble.

She looked at them — tired eyes, anxious faces, doodled notebooks.

And she didn’t give them a lecture.

She told them a story.

About a girl who wanted to be perfect.
Who failed twice.
Who once sat on a hostel terrace with nothing left to hold on to except a paper butterfly.

She paused.

Then held up a tiny blue origami butterfly in her hand.

"This," she said, “was my turning point.
Not the day I cracked an exam.
Not the day I published a book.
But the day I *let myself stay* — even when everything told me to leave.”

The room was still.
Some students had tears in their eyes.
One girl clutched her pen like a lifeline.

When the applause came, it wasn't loud.
It was… reverent.
Like a thank you whispered in a storm.

As she stepped off the stage, someone tapped her shoulder.

"Excuse me… Aanya?"

She turned.

It was **her**.

Hair shorter now.
Glasses instead of lenses.
But the voice — still soft, still cautious — unmistakably Srishti.

Aanya gasped. "Srishti?!"

They stood staring at each other for a moment too long — like two lives that had once split at a railway station now finding the same platform again.

Then came the hug.

Not the kind you give an old classmate.

But the kind you give a ghost who came back alive.

They walked through the campus lawns after the event.

"So," Aanya smiled, "what are you doing here?"

“I teach here now,” Srishti said. “Psychology. I guess… I wanted to be the help I didn’t get.”

Silence.

Then Aanya said, “I missed you.”

Srishti nodded. “I missed myself too. I’m only now finding her again.”

Before they parted, Srishti reached into her bag.

“I kept this,” she said, handing Aanya a notebook.

Aanya flipped it open.

Her old poems.
Scrawled in blue ink.
The ones she had tossed out.
Srishti had saved them.

“I thought someday the world would need them,” she said.

Aanya’s eyes burned. “Thank you.”

“No,” Srishti replied. “Thank *you* for surviving.”

That night, Aanya stood at her window, the moonlight falling over her writing desk.

She opened the old notebook.

And began to write — not about fire or ashes.

But about **flight**.

The kind that begins only after you crash.

Chapter 30: Epilogue – A Library of Lives

Five years later.

The library was not a building.

It had no walls, no shelves.

Just a suitcase.
A battered brown suitcase with *Ashes Archive* hand-painted across the lid.
Inside: letters.
Poems.
Unfinished journals.
Stories that never made it to Instagram captions or school magazine pages.

Each one written by someone who survived.

Aanya sat under a banyan tree in a school courtyard in Bhopal.

Beside her was the suitcase.

Before her, a semicircle of students.
Quiet. Curious. One of them biting their nails in anxiety.
Another gripping a notebook but too scared to share.

She opened the suitcase.

“This,” she said, “is not fiction.”

She picked up a folded page.

“I thought of jumping from the third floor of my coaching building.
But then I read a chapter called *Paper Doesn’t Burn Without Oxygen* — and realized I was holding my breath, not my pain.”

She looked up. “That person is alive. Somewhere. Right now.”

A pause.

Then another student asked softly, “Can I add something to the suitcase?”

She smiled.

“Please do.”

The *Ashes Archive* had no fixed address.
It traveled.

To hostels.
To universities.
To rehab centers.
To a village school once, where a boy who never spoke wrote a poem about birds that chose not to fly — and called it “Safe Sky.”

Aanya no longer introduced herself as an author.

She simply said: “I listen.”

She knew her story was no longer *hers*.
It was a seed.

One that had grown into a forest of voices.

On the tenth anniversary of *Ink from the Ashes*, the publisher sent her a note:

“Your book didn’t top charts.
It topped hearts.
We’ve stopped counting reprints.”

She placed the letter inside the suitcase.

Next to a paper butterfly.
Next to a burned page that still smelled faintly of Kota hostel smoke.
Next to a new note — written by a girl with shaky handwriting:

“I didn’t end my story
Because I read yours.”
– A Reader

And maybe that’s what survival is.

Not erasing the burn marks.

But turning them into bookmarks
for someone else’s next chapter.

[The End]

Author’s Note

This book began as a whisper — a quiet thought scribbled between study breaks, on the backs of notebooks, and in the stillness of nights I couldn’t sleep. I never intended it to be seen. I just needed a place to breathe.

But slowly, as the pages grew, so did I.

Ink from the Ashes is more than a collection of memories. It’s a tribute to every silent battle, every breakdown behind closed doors, and every voice that was once too afraid to speak. It's for the students who feel they’re not enough, for the dreamers drowning in expectations, and for anyone who’s ever been told to stay quiet when their soul wanted to scream.

Writing this book didn’t solve everything — but it saved something inside me.

I hope, in some quiet way, it does the same for you.

With ink-stained fingers and a heart still learning,

– Subha

APPENDIX

🗓️ TIMELINE OF A JOURNEY THAT ALMOST BROKE ME

2019 – FIRST SERIOUS THOUGHTS ABOUT BECOMING A DOCTOR
2020 – THE WORLD SHUT DOWN, AND SO DID I
2021 – NEET ATTEMPT #1 — DEFEAT, DENIAL, DARKNESS
2022 – NEET ATTEMPT #2 — BETTER, BUT STILL NOT ENOUGH
2023 – THE YEAR I ALMOST GAVE UP
2024 – FOUND HOPE AGAIN — IN SILENCE, IN BOOKS, IN MYSELF
2025 – IISER BERHAMPUR. A NEW CHAPTER BEGINS.

📚 BOOKS THAT CARRIED ME THROUGH THE STORM

- *IT'S OKAY TO NOT BE OKAY* – MEGAN DEVINE
- *ATOMIC HABITS* – JAMES CLEAR
- *IKIGAI* – HECTOR GARCIA
- *TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE* – MITCH ALBOM

- *Man's Search for Meaning* – Viktor E. Frankl

🎧 Songs I Breathed Through

- *Chal Ghar Chalein* – Arijit Singh
- *Fix You* – Coldplay
- *Phir Le Aaya Dil* – Rekha Bhardwaj
- *Let Her Go* – Passenger
- *Aabaad Barbaad* – Arijit Singh

📜 Unsent Letters and Diary Fragments

"What if I'm not meant to succeed, only survive?"

"Today I didn't cry — maybe that's progress."

"I envy butterflies. They break to become something beautiful."

– From a diary page dated: 14 October 2022

💬 If You're Still Struggling...

Please know: you are not a failure. You are not too late. You are not broken beyond repair.

If you ever feel alone, this book was written for you. And maybe that means you're not so alone, after all.

Acknowledgements

Writing this book was not just a journey through words—it was a journey through memories, pain, healing, and quiet victories. I owe a deep gratitude to the people who stood beside me, even when I couldn't stand myself.

To **my parents** – for believing in me even when I had stopped believing in anything. Your silent strength, your sacrifices, and your unconditional love carried me through the darkest nights.

To my **sister/brother/family** – thank you for reminding me that home is more than just a place. It's where love lives, even in silence.

To my **teachers and mentors**, especially those who never judged my pace or my pauses—thank you for seeing more in me than I could see in myself. You were the first to notice

WHEN I NEEDED HELP, AND THE LAST TO GIVE UP ON ME.

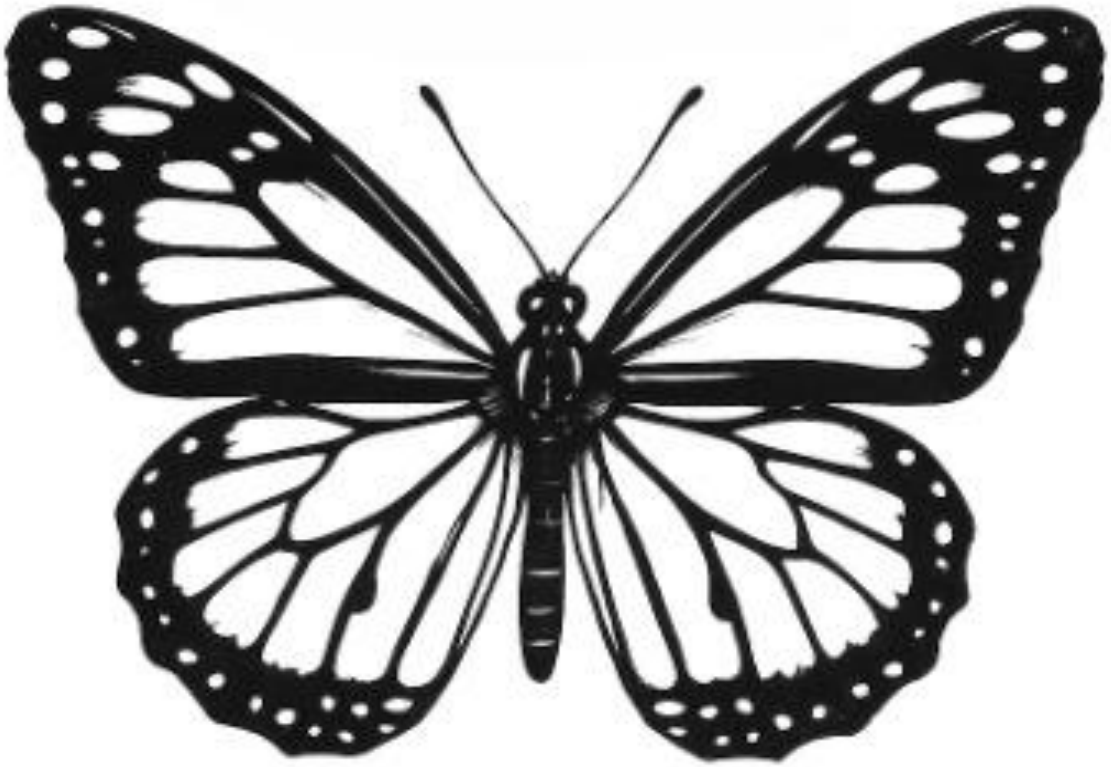
TO THE **FRIENDS WHO STAYED** AND THE ONES WHO LEFT—BOTH TAUGHT ME SOMETHING ABOUT TRUST, TIME, AND TRUTH. SOME OF YOU BECAME LIFELINES. OTHERS, LESSONS. I'M GRATEFUL FOR BOTH.

TO **BOOKS, MUSIC, AND BLUE BUTTERFLIES**—THANK YOU FOR BEING MY THERAPY WHEN NOTHING ELSE WORKED. I FOUND FRAGMENTS OF MYSELF IN BETWEEN YOUR PAGES AND NOTES.

AND LASTLY, TO **THE BROKEN VERSION OF MYSELF**—THANK YOU FOR SURVIVING. YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAITED ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SILENCE, BUT YOU KEPT GOING ANYWAY. THIS BOOK IS YOUR ECHO.

Contact

📧 **Email:** [ratikantasahoo1555@gmail.com]



FINDING HOPE BETWEEN BURNT PAGES

‘Some stories don’t end in silence.
They ignite.’

INK FROM THE ASHES

SUBHA